

DON JAMES

Small Groups as a Model for Urban Churches

My Personal Journeys

After pastoring in the Oregon Conference for 15 years I accepted an invitation to pastor a dying church with a membership of 200 in Gresham, Oregon. The average attendance was less than 100 each Sabbath. I had just finished going through a Church Growth Seminar on Small Groups at the New Hope Community Church in Portland, Oregon, led by Pastor Dale Galloway. It was the first small group training I had ever received and was very informative. I felt it was a ministry that many of our churches were lacking, including my own. After presenting the ministry idea to the church, who voted enthusiastically to proceed, we started the ministry. For the next three years, the Gresham Seventh-day Adventist Church became a church of small groups. At the end of three years we had 18 small groups and doubled the average church attendance to 200 per Sabbath. The most rewarding factor was that we not only baptized 20-25 individuals, but we never lost one new convert. Every new church member was always part of a small group where friends were made and community happened. I was at the high point in my ministry and had no plans of leaving pastoral ministry.

After the three years in Gresham, Oregon, I received a call to join the North American Division Evangelistic Institute (NADEI) to teach small group ministry and evangelism to seminary students and within the division as invited. After much persuasion I accepted the invitation, promising only to give them five years of service, and then I would go back into pastoral ministry. It has now been 24 years teaching small groups to seminary students, teaching small groups in every union throughout the North American Division and in sixteen countries around the world. I had to accept the fact that multiplying my ministry in other leaders was of more value than leading a local congregation.

September 11, 2001 was a devastating day for America as the Twin Towers collapsed on Manhattan Island. Elder Don Schneider, then North American Division President, was talking to me on the phone one day and said he had three questions he wanted me to think over. First question, "What can the seminary do to help minister to the people in New York City?" He then requested that I not answer the questions right then but to get back to him after a few days with my answers. Second question, "What can NADEI do to help minister to the people in New York City?" At that point I knew where he was heading and I asked him not to continue. He continued, with the third question, "What can YOU do to help minister to the people in New York City?"

After contemplating, talking to several students and faculty, and praying for several days I called Elder Schneider back and gave him my answers. After the Winter Semester was finished, the seminary sponsored my wife Ruth and myself to go and work in New York City for the next five months, January to May 2002. Along with us, Pamela Simpson came from the Central California Conference to share in the ministry. The Central California Conference covered the rent of our apartment building, \$3000 a month. This apartment building was twenty stories high with ten apartments on each floor, for a total of about 200 apartments. There were three additional apartment buildings that were part of the complex. We began praying for two to three hours each day for our neighbors that we would soon become friends. Prayer and Parties were the beginning of our work. Each month we would hold a social event in our apartment inviting fifty different families to join with us so we could get acquainted since we were new to New York City. The socials were open door events from 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. on Sundays so people could come and go as they pleased. Each of those four Sundays our apartment was packed with families, not only getting acquainted with us, but with each other. It too became a highlight of our ministry as we immersed ourselves into urban living. Never in all our lives had we ever had any great desire to live in a city. After five months of being totally engaged in reaching out to individuals who were shook to the core from the disaster, Ruth said that if we could continue to be sponsored to live there and do this ministry she would stay. In the end we had three small groups; two relational small groups and a third group with a group of six Japanese young mothers and their children. They first wanted to meet with us to learn how to speak better English, so we arranged to meet one afternoon a week. For three weeks they would ask questions about Christianity so we started adding another hour and opening the Scriptures to them about Jesus and who he was. In the end we were giving an additional seven individual Bible studies. In those five months' time we had developed 86 close friends who we were able to talk freely with about Christianity.

Small Groups—A Model for Urban Churches

This brings us to the question, Why small groups as a model for urban churches? First: I will look at three aspects or results of small groups: community, synergy, and mission.

Community

Larry Crabb states that “when members of a spiritual community reach a sacred place of vulnerability and authenticity, something is released. . . . An appetite for the holy things is stirred. For just a moment, the longing to know God becomes intense, stronger than all other passions, worth whatever price must be paid for it. . . . Togetherness in Christ encourages movement toward Christ” (1999:22, 23).

This is a major goal of small groups, to enter into community with God and with one another. In literature we find such words as authenticity, openness, and relationships to be synonymous with community. Authenticity is at the very core of real community. Being real to oneself and to others, and not pretending may bring about risk of rejection but is essential for community. Openness is a characteristic of authenticity in the practice of community building (Taylor 1993). There needs to be open communication to build relationships and to have community. “Relationships are viewed as being actively created and shaped in the ongoing communication process of interrelating with one another” (Rogers and Escudero 2004:233). It seems that in nature there is interwoven at the very core of life relationships and community. At the very heart of God, we find Jesus’ prayer, that his people would become one (John 17 NIV).

The Trinity lives in community. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have by their very nature lived in community throughout eternity. Christians worship one God, yet in that oneness there has always existed the Trinity. This is a truth that goes beyond the experience of humankind, as does the truth of eternity. That oneness has been understood to some extent in the character, unity, and purpose of God.

The Trinity existed in community throughout eternity except for one break. That single break took place at Calvary. During that one moment when humanity’s sins crushed and separated the Son from the Father, Jesus cried out, “My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46). When Jesus bore humankind’s sins, He severed the eternal community of the Trinity. It is important to note that the worst part about sin is that it always destroys community. Community within the Trinity can be described as:

God the Father loves and delights in the Son (Matt. 3:17), Jesus receives that love and pleases His Father as an obedient and loving Son (John 8:29), and honors the Spirit (Matt. 12:31), while the Spirit glorifies both the Father and the Son (John 16:14). Each person in the Trinity loves, honors, and glorifies the other, and receives love and honor back from the others, because He is worthy. There is never any lack. (Beckham 1998)

God cannot exist alone, apart from community. His very nature cries out for community throughout Scripture. He is constantly pleading to his people to move into community. Using the example of the Trinity it can be said that community begins with three.

In Scripture God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26). As God has created us in his likeness, therefore one characteristic of his likeness would be that we were created for and with the desire of living in community. Small groups give us that vehicle whereby we can enter into community with others.

Synergy

Synergism is when the sum of the total is greater than the parts. To illustrate, one horse can normally pull two tons, while two horses hitched together can sometimes pull up to twenty-three tons (Beckham 1998). The combination of group members can many times accomplish much more than all the individuals ever could working separately.

Many top American corporations are using groups called "teams" for the very purpose of creating synergism. They take the managers of different groups, such as sales, operations, and service, and make them into a team. With this new model the "team" becomes responsible for operating a little company, which is ultimately responsible to the big company. These teams develop complementary skills necessary to achieve the team's goals. Robert Laber defines a team as "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (1997:11). It goes without saying that the team moves forward with a common purpose. That purpose gives the team "an identity that reaches beyond the sum of the individuals involved." There is teamwork, performance, and dynamic power. Laber continues by saying that the teams (small groups) that are operating in America today "are like committees on steroids" (1997:11).

One reason people join groups, according to Tim Borchers (n.d.), is group synergy. "Group synergy refers to the idea that two heads (or more) are better than one. You may have also heard the phrase, 'the whole

is greater than the sum of its parts,' which also refers to group synergy. Put simply, groups are often capable of producing higher quality work and better decisions than can an individual working alone."

Is it any wonder that Moses, in Genesis 18, organized Israel into groups of tens? What about Jesus choosing twelve for the purpose of synergism (Luke 6:12-16)? Today we find that eight out of ten of the largest churches in the world are based on small groups, and a sizeable portion of the most rapidly growing world-class churches are small group-based. It seems obvious that those following the principles of small group ministry without a doubt have created synergy.

Mission

With community comes synergy and with community and synergy a *mission* is bound to evolve. Let us go back to the Trinity. In Scripture God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26). An essential characteristic of love is its desire to enlarge community. Again God is working together within his community, for he says, "Let us" while at the same time desiring to enlarge his community. Moses in the wilderness took Israel and organized it into groups. The basic group was a group of 10. But the purpose of Israel was not to live in community just for themselves but to reach beyond themselves, to reach out and enlarge their community.

The children of Israel were to occupy all the territory which God appointed them. . . . God's purpose that by the revelation of his character through Israel men should be drawn unto him. To all the world the gospel invitation was to be given. . . . All who, like Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God were to unite themselves with his chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased, they were to enlarge their borders until their kingdom should embrace the world. (White 1943:19)

Jesus and his disciples, his small group of twelve, were constantly reaching out and touching the lives of others, ministering to them, and healing many. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the baptism of the church, took place only after the 120 disciples became bonded in community. Men and women shared their lives together for ten days, probably forming themselves into small groups and sharing within and among the groups. No sermons, no agenda (they were the agenda), just one another in fellowship, sharing life until they were "in one accord" (Acts 1 and 2 KJV).

In the beginning of this article I first looked at three aspects or results

of small groups: Community, Synergy, and Mission. Second, it was noted that a small group could be as small as three, the example of the Trinity. Notice the following quote that is well known among Seventh-day Adventist advocates for small groups.

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by One who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members, but for unbelievers. If in one place there are only two or three who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers. Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others. Let them reveal Christlike forbearance and patience, speaking no hasty words, using the talent of speech to build one another up in the most holy faith. Let them labor in Christlike love for those outside the fold, forgetting self in their endeavor to help others. As they work and pray in Christ's name, their numbers will increase. (White 1948:7:21, 22)

First, the above quote states that God has presented before his servant that we are to establish small companies (small groups) for the purpose of doing Christian work. Christian work is to include building up one another in the faith and also to reach out to unbelievers. Second, small group work is for both large member churches and where there are but a few scattered believers. Even if there are only "two or three," they are to form themselves into small groups and do the work God has given them. "Let them keep their bond of union unbroken, pressing together in love and unity, encouraging one another to advance, *each gaining courage and strength from the assistance of the others*" (emphasis mine). That's synergy.

It seems very clear that if there is a large church in any area, countryside, suburban area, or in an urban context, that they are to organize themselves into small ministering units to do the work that God has given his church to do. I have known, preached, and taught this message for twenty-five years. Now all of a sudden I see more clearly than before that even if there are only two or three individuals within an area they too must organize themselves into a ministry group. For the purpose of this paper I will call such a group "Triads."

Triads are groups of two or three, of the same gender, made up of those who desire to grow in Jesus. Triads meet together once a week just like a small group of 10-15. Triads are made up of those who wish to grow spiritually, overcome strongholds in their lives in order that they may have a deeper connection with Jesus. Triads disciple another or one another. Neil

Cole writes about Triads in his book, *Cultivating a Life for God* (1999). However he titles his groups "Life Transformation Groups."

There are only three goals that each Triad is to accomplish. The first is when the group meets together they share with each other the things that they have done or been involved with that pleases God as well as those areas that they need encouragement and to be held accountable for in order to not continue to displease God (Heb 10:24-25; Jas 5:16). Second the group decides what material to use in equipping one another in discipleship. It could be a book on a needed spiritual topic or a book of the Bible. They then decide how much they will read throughout the week with the plan of discussing what they read, sharing thoughts and insights gained, along with questions and application. Third, the group develops a list of individuals who they wish to share Jesus with through prayer and action. One can easily see that Community, Synergy, and Mission would be the results of such groups.

As Triads grow eventually two to four Triads could combine themselves together, thus forming a small group of six to twelve individuals for the purpose of increasing resources and strength. As small groups grow and multiply, a district of house churches can soon develop.

In most urban areas such as Manhattan a two-bedroom apartment will rent for more than \$3000 a month. So thinking of purchasing facilities for worship is unthinkable; renting adequate places for worship will always be costly and challenging. So the question that must be answered is, just what is church? Is it possible that our concept or definition of church is really more cultural than biblical? When we think of a local church we think in terms of a church building with a set of beliefs that define it in contrast to other churches, where passive laity pay a pastor to do the preaching and lead in the work. In Scripture, we see the singular word *church* used in three settings: First, the church universal (all baptized followers of Christ worldwide). Second, the church in the city (all those who make up the church in a city or town, e.g., the church in Corinth or the church in Ephesus), and third, the church that meets (the gathering of the church at a given location and time, e.g., the church in the home of Priscilla and Aquilla) (Broodryk 2010).

Broodryk also points that within urban settings people are often found in small groups consisting of 3-4 individuals. These groups are not formed around families but around interest or affinity groups. "These are groups of business men, gatherings in trains during commute, groups in schools, etc." Now it may be difficult to define such a small group as a church but perhaps the word "church" is wider than such a small unit. Perhaps church could be defined as a "multiplicity of groups meeting in a variety of settings and contexts, networked through interpersonal mentoring and

led by a team of elders who influence the network" (Broodryk). Broodryk ends his article with his suggested definition of church:

Church is the collection of baptized believers in the Lord Jesus Christ in a given locality (city or network), who gather regularly (in one group or several) for the purposes of worship, discipleship and nurture and who depart those gatherings with the intention of obeying all the commands of Christ, in order to transform their families, communities and cities. (Broodryk 2010)

There is much more that could be said and added to this article on what recent research has discovered about small groups. But it seems that in the cities where we already have established churches that small groups are really the only effective way to mobilize God's people into workable units to reach outside themselves and touch lives for Jesus. Where it is not possible to be part of such an established church, then units of two to three individuals functioning as a small group is essential in reaching those around them. Either way, small groups are a highly effective model for urban churches.

In closing I wish to share two recent happenings. In August 2009 I went to Beirut, Lebanon to teach a group of 26 students who were focusing on reaching Muslims in their countries of origin. The majority of the students were pastors from Africa and the Middle East. These young pastors became so excited about using small groups in their ministry that a year later it was reported to me that those 26 students had over a thousand small groups established. Second, in July 2014, I again had the privilege to teach and share concerning small groups with students in Kyrgyzstan. These young pastors were from the six countries in the Euro-Asia Division.

Kyrgyzstan with 7-8 churches is the most open of the six countries. Kazakhstan has two missions, the North Mission with 26 churches and the South Mission with 13 churches. The country also has a lot of large cities. Tajikistan has only 2 churches, is very poor, and has only a few workers. Uzbekistan has 5-7 churches, and the country only allows the Bible to be read in the privacy of one's home. There is a \$5,000 fine if religious books are found in any home. Turkmenistan has no churches, 1 lady worker and 2 lady missionaries. Afghanistan has no churches and only 1 underground missionary (Sands 2014).

Several of these students came to me during the session sharing their excitement about small groups but more so about Triads. They saw that Triads could be established safely in their country where small groups could draw too much attention from the authorities. Hopefully I will receive a good report from that part of the world in the near future.

For many reasons I believe that small groups are one of the strongest ministries that can equip, disciple, and grow the church and that can easily be adapted for restricted access countries and in urban contexts. Small groups are *The Model* for urban churches.

Works Cited

- Beckham, William A. 1998. Unpublished presentation for Cell Church Conference in Strategy & Transition, New Albany, Indiana.
- Borchers, Tim. n.d. Why Do People Join a Group?" *Small Group Communication*, Moorhead State University. <http://www.abacon.com/commstudies/groups/join.html> (accessed 23 March 2005).
- Broodryk, David. Re-thinking urban church. Quoted in David Watson's blog *Church Planting Essentials: Urban Church Planting*. May 15, 2010. www.davidwatson.org/2010/05/15/church-planting-essentials-urban-church-planting/ (accessed 1 September 2014).
- Crabb, Larry. 1999. *The Safest Place on Earth*. Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group.
- Cole, Neal. 1999. *Cultivating a Life for God*. St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources.
- Laber, Robert. 1997. *Group Process—Working Effectively by Committee*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing.
- Rogers, L. Edna, and Valentin Escudero, eds. 2004. *Relational Communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sands, Peter. 2014. *Kyrgyzstan, What I Have Been Up To in the Last Few Weeks*. PowerPoint presentation received from author in August 2014.
- Taylor, Sharon. 1993. Community Building Research. Renew Institute of Culture and Learning, Memorial University of Newfoundland. <http://morgan.ucs.mun.ca/~staylor/appC.html> (accessed 22 March 2005).
- White, Ellen G. 1943. *Patriarchs and Kings*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.
- _____. 1948. *Testimonies for the Church*. 9 vols. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press.



Don James, Associate Director of North American Division Evangelistic Institute, pastored for 18 years in the Oregon Conference, has taught for 24 years and continues teaching on Small Group Evangelism in the Seminary at Andrews University. He has taught Small Groups throughout each of the North American Division Unions and in 16 different countries around the world. Don and his wife Ruth, have three children and five grandchildren.